
Cocoanut Palms and Florida Sunset 138
FIELD

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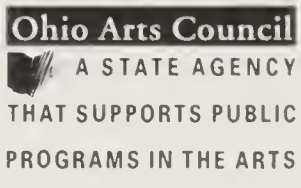

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BUFFALO YOGA CODA I

Low deck, Montana sky
color of cold Confederate uniforms,
High water in all the creeks, trees down
From wind and wet, beginning of June,
Snow yesterday, hard rain and hard frost, three bags full,
White caps and white river, welcome back,
The tamaracks whisper and the lodge pole and the sough.

I slip the word in my shirt pocket: Time.
To warm it, to keep it dark, to keep it back from Forever.
I fold it in half and hold it there.
Like the cicada, however, it leaves its body and goes about its business,
Slick shell, such beautiful wings,
A corpse to reckon with.
Memento mori, perhaps.

———

That which we leave unspoken is like the hail from last night's storm
Still clustered and white
in the shadowy tall grass, as yet unreached by the sun.
Like unuttered words, they disappear
One by one in the light,
crystal and golden for an instant, then nothing at all.
Like everything else not done or not chosen.
Like all that's liquid and overlooked,
what we don't give, what we don't take.

———

Bullbat's back,
high up and almost unseeable in the morning's glare,
Swallows a hyperkinetic singsong down below.
I daydream about a pierced, medieval vision,
a suppuration of wounds,

A spurting of blood,
One ladle, two quick and endless gulps.
St. Catherine of Siena, drink something from me.

Like the patch of late snow each one of us has left in his heart
Hoarding some hurt or other,
some windchime of vague consequence,
The world has a caked and cold spot for the self-deceived,
No matter how much they glitter and spark in the sleeved sunfall.
Theirs is the dark inheritance of the doubly dead.
For them the snuffed flame, the Fifteenth Station of the Cross.

Like intercessionary prayers to Purgatory,
Our little whines and our simperings
Flutter into the weather.
No wonder no answer is all we ever get, no wonder.

The purple violets are just back in the long grass.
You don't hear a peep from them,
Intent, as they are, on doing whatever it is they're here to do.
Look how low they lie in the wind,
how pursed their lips are.

In the high house of oblivion, there are many windows.
Through one of them, a light like the light
Now sliding across the meadow slides,
burst and perpetual.
One knows it from old frames of celluloid, exposed some,
That scorch like a wood flame, a hard light
That does not illuminate, but outlines and silhouettes.
Inside its panes the snow falls,
defining and flame-colored snow.

Through all the rest, no light shines,
Silence breeds and recalibrates, no waters whiffle, no wind.

———

Night fog, denser and denser.
Above it, an endlessness,
flight path for the newly received.
Or so they want to believe, their poor hands like poor flags in the distance.
Down here, however, it's difficult.
Down here, it's a different story.
This world, no thought of the other.

We'd like the fog to drift and rise, but it hugs the ground.
Like words we meant to say, but didn't.
We'd like to tell the departed to come back,
to say we're sorry for what we didn't say.
If, in fact, they're up there.
If, in fact, they're not still here
still hugging the ground like fog, like us.

———

I think I'll lie down just here for a while,
the sun on my cheek,
The wind like grass stems across my face,
And listen to what the world says,
the luminous, transubstantiated world,
That holds me like nothing in its look.

BUFFALO YOGA CODA II

If, as Kafka says, the hunting dogs,
At play in the stone courtyard,
Will catch the hare no matter,
regardless of how it may be flying
Already now through the dark forest,
Then it must stay itself with just these trees
and their bright passage.
These marks and punctuations before the sentence ends,
Before, in short, and black as a bible,
the period closes in.

If, on the other hand, the hunting dogs,
now at play
In the stone courtyard,
Never arrive, the story becomes less classical.
And the hare, however fast,
will always be slow enough
To outlast the ending, which presupposes the source
Of story and storyline,
Which cannot be doubted, and so the period snaps in place.

And thus one parable becomes another, the sun,
As it must, continues its chords and variations,
The waters lisp in the speckled woods,
The deer put their tentative feet,
one forward, one back,
On the dead pine needles and dead grass,
Then turn like Nijinsky out of the sunlight and up the hill.
When Tolstoy met Chekov, Chekov says,
they spoke of immortality, what else.

Outside the outhouse door frame, dewbows, a spatter of

Word-crystals, little eternities,
each one of them,
Syllable, syllable, one handful of sleep, then two.

The long body of the Hunter Gracchus,
needle on Kafka's compass,
Slides through the upper meadow out of the south-southwest
As it does each year
Ceaselessly circumnavigating
Our lives,
always true north, always the black river just inches above the ground,
Time's sluice and time's undertow,
On its way to Mr. Caribou, and on toward the northern lights.

The dove finds no olive leaf,
so it slips back to the darkness inside the ark,
He wrote toward the end of his short, pain-dominant life.
And who would say otherwise?
There was a bird in the room, he wrote,
Each of his limbs as tired as a whole human being.
Whoever heard of a dying man drinking?
he asked, unable to do so himself.
And who would ask otherwise?

Late spring in the upper northwest,
first day of summer and the lilac just out,
Pale purple and dark purple,
Over the white of the propane tank in back of the cabin.
The lilac is wonderful, isn't it, he wrote once,
Even when dying it drinks,
like a fish you might say.
Pale purple and dark purple,
And green of the underleaf, and green of the meadow.

I take down the thin book of All I Will Ever Know,
And find them, the one entry,
Three tiny words, three poised and tail-lifted scorpions.

Inadequate to the demands
imagination has settled upon me,
I listen to what the landscape says,
And all that it fails to say, and what the clouds say, and the light,
Inveterate stutterer.
Not much this morning, it turns out,
Odor of lilac like a south wind
Suddenly through the open window, swallow twaddle
Inelegant under the raw eaves.

Kafka appears in a splotch of sunlight
beyond the creek's course,
Ready, it seems, to step off the *via dolorosa* he's walked through the dark forest.
I offer him bread, I offer him wine and soft cheese,
But he stands there, hands in his pockets,
Shaking his head no, shaking his head,
unable, still,
To speak or eat or to drink.
Then raises his right hand and points to the lilacs,
smiles, and changes back into sunlight.

BUFFALO YOGA CODA III

Late morning on the cusp of the world,
Clouds beginning to burble and build
across the southern skyline,
Sussuration of waters,
Sunlight settling like a giant bird
Soundlessly over the meadow,
feathery touches at the edges of things.

The raven is yakking and looking for somewhere to land,
the restless raven,
Begetter of aches and many wounds,
Malicious informant, *boia* of the airy blue.
One tree's not good enough;
he tries another and then a third.
He's got his bright eye on me.

Under the low hum of the sweet bees,
Under the hair-heavy hoof of the warrior ant,
Under the towering shadows he must go through,
and surface from,
Under the beetle's breast and the grub's,
The future is setting its table,
its cutlery dark, its mirrors anxious and blank.

———-

Can sunlight rustle across the skin?
Can dew fall upon the eye?
Can lamentations of the unborn grieve in the wind?
Can alien constellations comfort the sore children?
Can the hands of the dead rise?
Can God untwist all that he's twisted?
Can horizons steal our breath?
Can we take back the borrowed dust we've given away?

Can the right word ring, O my, forever in the ear?
Can a selfish song be its own praise?

These are the simulacra of our days,
the June clouds
Like Navajo rugs on heaven's floor,
grey-black in the underwarp,
Dullness of distance in the shadowless corridors
Down through the forest,
lilacs deglazed and past repair,
Pine squirrels riding the grub line from thicket to window sill and back.

Humdrum and extracurricular,
the waters turn from our touch, the grass yields,
And all the spidery elegance of afternoon
Lays down its weary body,
Legs tucked and dimmed some,
unbidden and warm at our feet.
It's somebody's birthday, the 27th of June.
Sitting outside on the new-laid steps, I sharpen my pencil

To rig up his elegy,
Which this is, at least in part, and mine as well, I guess,
If the road he takes to return here
Is Koo Koo Boyd or Solo Joe,
French Garver or Basin Creek;
And if, in the Indian paintbrush sundown, the sound
He hears is the bullbat or summer snipe,
then this is for both of us.

A fine rain and a fine mist,
return of the Great Blue heron

To Porcupine and its upper reaches, above the creek bridge.
How beautiful summer is,
with all its creatures and all its weather,
Sunblade for just a second, then back in its scabbard of clouds,
Robins and rain continuing to pierce and pick at the earth,
Great Blue at the top of the last larch,
eye ready for his turn.

Last legs of the lilac, but here come the lupin and bear grass,
The paintbrush and yarrow stalks.
Black ants work the underground,
free-lancing among the stones and clay lumps,
Their slighter cousins hard and orderly at the weeds.

Two white-tail does, flags up, at romp in the near meadow,
One snipe in a sexual dive and collapse,
just there, in the marsh slough,
Moose at the salt block,
East-inching shadows like black tongues licking themselves up.

I think I'll lie down just here for a while,
the sun on my cheek,
The wind like grass stems across my face,
And listen to what the world says,
the luminous, transubstantiated world,
That holds me like nothing in its look.

EARS

Throughout life, the ears continue to grow, having taken in
The hammer and tongs of manual typewriting, the clunk
Of a barbell-like telephone receiver, thwack
Of a suction-cupped arrow relinquishing a
Body part. Then someone's pressing a shirt and there's
A gasp of steam, proud as the zeitgeist, then some untranscribed
Garboesque sounds, then a song repeating *"Carmella te quiero"*
To the point of dizzy nonsense, then a warm night with crickets
Rounding the same tight corner faster, faster, slower, slower, but
The road doesn't end yet. Then the crisp groan
Of amortized snow as we walk to a room full of our friend
Felicia, her throat lifted and her incongruous arms pulsing
With a song too stubborn to reproduce.
Along the railroad tracks,
One of the ears' favorite
Hang-outs, there's the huge harmless clash
Of two boxcars, which the air afterwards tries to
Take back, and the New Orleans Crescent's whistle
Delivering joyous anxiety twice daily. And, most enlightening
Of all, an owl, whose hoots seem to echo
Rimbaud, *"Je est un autre,"*
But indeed I'm here.

INVITATION #2

Come to me.
Be one with my absurdities.
The mountain quivers in the gunmetal heat
And what voices I thought I longed for
Babble in a pencil case. Come, I say.
Don't just stand there like an end table
Polished stupid. I don't give a swipe
For all your on-guard sensibilities.
Watch my mouth. I am not your wallpaper.
I am not your Channel 8. The owl's swoop,
The mouse's cry, play out against dusk's
Well-oiled machinery. Even the colors
Fall into disrepair. We are not exempt.
The time devoted to writing this
Could have been heaven in a hammock
Kissing the no out of your mouth.

THE DREAM OF THE ROTTEN DAUGHTER

On the night of the day
she buried her mother

her father turned to her
from the grip of an old

photograph, her six-year
dead daddy, swiveled his

bullet head, nailing her
to him with a blood-shot

sniggery eye, then stuck
out his tongue. She woke up

laughing, recognizing
the title of this poem

before she wrote it, there
on the point of that red

wad where he'd honed it all
those years, slipping it in

between her ribs when she
least expected. It was

his label for her from
the time of the big bed

Sunday mornings, and she
between them pretending

oblivion, a balled-
up cuddle to bridge their

unbridgeable gap. Or
(speak truth, oh rotten one)

usurp the I'm-here-first
of that furious eye.

Old news, old news. Tell it
another way. Make it

a Halloween story,
Poe story—ghouls, spiders,

cellars and foul air: Two
dolls in their boxes, laid

side by side like people
bewitched in an iron sleep

and a ghost with a blood
eye and a butcher's tongue

who cut his way into
his daughter's dream to say

of the newly dead, *Boo!*
I won. I've got her now.

SHATTERING

1.
Tonight in your arms
watching over your sleep,
unable for three nights now
to let go of you, I imagine
(can't help but imagine) you
on that high floor
calling to say *Love*
as if I didn't know that
already, but you, like so
many others, needing to
lay down that
as your last word,
terrified you'll not get out
before that too tall building
slides down its sides
although you couldn't have
known that then, could you,
there being only the weight
of that fire coming at you
and you so afraid.
And I know,
because I love you, I'd have
to talk you out of there,
making my voice the fireman's
ladder, the helicopter's rope
that never came. Come, my own,
my blue-eyed boy, I'd say,
walk out on the running nap
of my voice, my voice
your carpet, your cocoon,
your velvet corridor out.
But the fire, the fire. Shhh.
Seal the lids to your eyes.
Nothing is but where I'm waiting.

And Now Love, Now—for now
there must be nothing
but us between us. And simple
as placing one foot after another,
you'd step through a blossom of glass
into the bright blue air.

2.
Is this not crazy?
You're asleep. The plosives
punctuating your breath
poof out your lips like
pudding in a pot or an engine
idling on kisses. While I,
ear to your chest and counting,
borrow scenarios from our latest
terror, as if we didn't have enough
to go around.
And shame. Look how
self-controlled I made myself,
how Hedda Gablerish, talking
you through such brave
and lovely death, all in the name
of love as if love were a name
without presence or heat,
without a face to xerox
and paste up all over town
or hug to your chest before
the whole world because it was
your heart leaped from your body,
lost and looking for itself.

And again I'm there—
only this time holding up
that photograph of you I love
leaning against the railing
in your blue suit when it was new,

and smiling as if the sun itself
summered in your face. And I—
one more soldier in misery's army
wandering the streets
begging to be listened to:

The fire, the fire. And how
I made of my voice a rug,
a flying carpet to get him out.
And yes, he came to me, yes.
I'm sure. Didn't you see him
running down those staircases of air?

AN EXCUSE FOR NOT RETURNING FOR YOUR MEMORIAL SERVICE

after Mei Yao Ch'en

Please don't be offended
I'm not there

when guests spill out the kitchen door
down the ramp beside
your garden in the rocks.

Over my shoulder, the voice
of the boy who
called me on your phone.

In my lap, your poems
speak again, loudly this time.

They cling to my sleeve
like children, they climb on my bed.
They don't want to sleep,
just tell stories

like linden leaves
scratching the glass with hearts

and it's too dark now to find your house.

NIGHT WALK: HOAN KIEM

The night moves in silken dresses.
Sleeveless arms and thin bared legs beckoning.

Streetcorner sandals raise a body
forever weightless in the air.

Lights of cars dragon-eyed in dusk.
The city's soft geomancy of love.

Everything always as if on the point of entering another landscape.

As if life were only a matter of bodies and spaces,

there, for the light to sing.

QUE HUNG

for Nguyen Duy

Heat coughing up in the street.

Dust swirling at a woman's ankles.
The street of shirts and pants.

Empty sunglasses following from glass windows.
The street of disembodied cell phones.

Men in offices thirty stories up,
studying the gradual shift of a river bank,
the left hours until lunch.

In a room of wood a man polishes over and over
the wide thick planks of an old forest table,
pulls himself up on the broken legs of his poetry.

THE CHIEF

When what has helped us has helped us enough
—W. S. Merwin

When what has helped us
has helped us enough and knows it
and walks away on two legs
with her backpack over one shoulder,
then what will want us
will sit opposite on the other couch.
What will take us
will practice tennis at night
while we sit in the dark inhabited house, heat on
and all the windows open,
each car driving by driving hard
up the hill.

When what has held us
has held us harder than we wanted
and who we thought we heard knocking
was knocking
but on the neighbor's door,
then what has harmed us will hold
what has helped us
like one egg in a very small bowl.

I am standing at the dirt grave of one buried Indian chief.
My love has brought me to this cemetery in the cold.

When what will hold us loosely,
with one hand on the back of our neck
does have her hand there
and keeps it,
even while we bend down
to stab a scrap of a poem

into the weeds where the chief's chest should be,
then what has helped us says enough:

It is the first moment of midnight in the exact middle of winter.
My love has brought me to this cemetery in the cold.
We stand very still for just one minute and then I'm ready to go.

SNARCISSUS

Pretty thing, to have gotten you by the bulb collar
tonight, in limp lamp light, to demonstrate your neck
with my thumbs.
Any transparency tries what light there is this late.
Tries it like you try my patience. Wears it
like you wear a dress: skinny skirt
stitched to your skinny hips, the frill
to the bodice of the bloom.
Silly thing, to feel
disheveled in front of a flower.
The sun set you up on the west-most crest
of a city divided by two hills.
I am embarrassed here, dirty
in a clean chair, my hair
like someone took a steak knife to the piano. Still,
I can say I've known you well and I will.
My hindsight possesses the sense of your smell.
A wedding dress in a cedar chest so
there: you happy?

DAYS OF 1909, '10, AND '11

He was the son of an oppressed, wretchedly poor sailor
(from an island in the Aegean).
He worked in a blacksmith's shop. He wore rags.
His work shoes were torn and pitiful,
his hands stained with rust and oil.

In the evening, after he closed the shop,
if there was something he particularly wanted,
some tie, a somewhat expensive one,
some tie for Sunday,
if he saw some beautiful blue shirt
in a shop window and yearned for it,
he sold his body for a half-crown or two.

I ask myself if in ancient times
glorious Alexandria had young men more sublime,
a more perfect boy than him, who went to waste:
clearly, there is no statue or painting of him;
thrown into a blacksmith's shabby shop,
with the back-breaking work,
the vulgar orgies, tormented, he was quickly spent.

translated by Aliki Barnstone

CALIGULA, CLAIRVOYANT

The punctured skullplate
opened nicely. The surgeons tweezed it up
then dropped it on the table like a saucer. Blood clot, clump
of blondish hair—his head was a hole in a dome. Caligula
bit his tongue while the surgeons poured a poison
on his brain
and sewed the skullplate back.

*

Such a headache, then, to turn birds into pains in the trees.
Such a grisly thrill, the sun with its muddy fingers
drumming on the sill. So he walked the streets at night
past Nubians
and their funny wagonloads of lime, the empty public baths, to the bars
where he could be anyone in a corner—

*

Like bombs, the wobbling of cups in saucers, like little deco starbursts.
No wonder he turned mean
and exhausted. The surgeons in their lovely
villas, looking over the Esquiline toward the sea. The surgeons
with their scalpels
and remote control,
their pudgy oyster faces.
No wonder Caligula became a god.

*

And over the city, an airplane thrummed and swagged, low
as a migraine with its trail of bombs—
In the park,
he watched a peculiar young man hide under a bench as,

one by one, the buildings shook and died,
as the fields outside Rome
burned like blankets on which a cigarette has fallen.

*

The poison under the skullplate turned like a gray cloud
so the future was a searing in the eyes, so Rome was a wasp's nest
of motorbikes and noise, of cafés
and boys in aprons balancing drinks
upon their trays, of airplanes that opened like milkweed pods
scattering their seeds over the last of the city.

*

And under the park bench, the shadow of the man
looked toward the ruins of the square, where the cafés had closed,
the umbrellas folded away—
It was a lovely city,
in its gold coins and arches, gorgeous where the fires
spread up the walls like vines.
Triple exposure, rot
where the dulled brain dies. And distance
made a drama of it.

CLAUDIUS ADRIFT

He is a dullard and he cannot speak.
—Livia

A cracking of the sail against the mast
brought me back,
though having nothing to say, I lay on the deckchair and did not move.
The foremast wagged like a finger.
The sun
thundered down and, *Oh*, I heard Gracie say from somewhere
below deck, *deal them right! You're dealing them all upside down
and everywhere*, and then they were laughing and someone else said
get me a drink.
Seemed the harbor had drifted off somewhere,

*

seemed it crawled far away as I simmered and browned—
and how beautiful, with one eye open, how lovely
the stretch of it,
the smile of masts in the distance, the little row of hulls
as though
nothing could undo them, no fighter plane to break their planks,

*

and it's true, some god carved out my tongue, replaced it with a fish.
It's true, my fingers shake and my left eye drifts.
I am always opening my mouth to speak
having thought great things,
and the others stop talking and smile and wait.
Such a patience
and sting until I close my scalèd mouth and leave the room.

*

How gorgeous and sad it was, I wanted to say, when Carthage fell,
each soldier sprinkling the street with salt.
And one by one, the windows
grinned into flame. The library swayed on its pillars, groaned as the roof
fell through into glitter and cloud.
I have always loved the grand moment,
the great, abstracted
dying off, when the city collapses and trees blaze.

*

And *He is writing a history*, my mother said, *of stammerers and dolts.*
And, *Draw already!* from below. *Draw a card or pass.*
Gracie laughed
and, as if from far away, ice chuckled in a glass. Call me no one,
for I'll never inherit. Call me lovely, because I have failed.

*

Far away, Rome slept
in its bed, Rome was dying and how badly
I wanted to make a poem
of it, wanted poor Valerian skinned again, wanted Julian
speared by his troops then carried hack home, or Nero
stabbed while his guards ran off
and the city just burned.

*

I am a young man now, but when I grow old,
my duplicitous wife
will bring me dinner. She will smile and look out the window
toward the boats and the harbor. I will eat a mushroom
and fall from my chair.

ORDINARY MORNINGS OF A COLISEUM

Please, not that rustling in the grass again.

—H. D.

1.
The dull straight-edge and a dab of chicken fat,
I was shaving in a fragment of mirror glass,
the rising sun crowning my bare shoulders. Asleep,

you dreamt the overhanging rainbow of saltimbanques—
then, the checks of black and white: or,
an ivory alphabet of the dead, levitated:

He was hanging at his knees from the high branch
of a dark tree. His cape
quickly brushing against her hair and face; also naked,
she sat there on a large black horse, its nostrils
expressing a scalded milk.

So, just a moonless sky, the clair silhouette
of two hairless bodies
seemingly unrelated in the enveloping night.
We are confessing again to the morning
and its shaded sparrowhawk,

I killed the lovers with your yellow arrows.
The rain washing their blood from the noble horse.
The rising sun
driving them back into their white paper costumes.

Now the sky paracleat, Moloiel, writes in his history
that the traces of iron and sulfur in oxblood
will someday motion like knives
erasing the flooding atoms of ink to parchment.

We think the pigeons around the coliseum

are thrilled with the sputtering pink
orchids of diesel. These days,

there are fewer semi-colons in judgment.

Just a large red wall, some white bones
behind it; here is
the room of sighs and the laughter
of what is called 'the graveyard.'

The Vatican telegraphing
a rural priest who said water gushed from living stone
and seemed to possess the feral powers
of our Mother's tears *themselves*.

The priest washed his turned knee in the grotto's pool. Below him
a procession of masons leaving the morning meal
to bathe in the cold river.

She walked past us—draped over her head a beige altar cloth
with its delicate gold ancestry.

The horse still idling in rain.

In your sleep you murdered
the little renault and that spirit above her, two
ciphers of the gothic copse, using
the old poisoned arrows of the coliseum. Blackbirds
scavenging across the high mead tables. Off

on our green hill, you saw the details
of an enumerated intaglio: Sixtus IV
admiring
the small blue observatory
and the newly constructed basilica squatting like a greening toad
in that smoke that we mistook for fog . . .

And later the painters of the renaissance pressing kerosene
from tubs of pitch. Flocks of birds
climbing above the fields of red wheat
and the narrowing margins of boxwood bleeding
significance?

2.
The paracleat in his oaken slipper is on the canal,
black velvet pillows
and the chuck-burning pipe of opium. A small boy is
paring the prelate's toenails, fresh oranges, snails—

even the blue-silver ramshackle
of the constellation *Croix de Guerre*
climbing on the moldering horizon—

the red coral domination of the sun
rebukes the hand mirror
in which the metropolitan Moloiel watches
across his cheek
the migrating white mole with a red hair in it.

Why would he poison this sick old pontiff
who'll be dead by mid-summer?

You thought it was his saltimbanques and lapdogs
that woke you, but
it was the breathing of the older men
with long scythes
mowing the cool dewy floors of a coliseum.

3.
M. bathes your chest in witch hazel from a tin cup,
and your fever plummets
with the song of the sparrowhawks . . .

The sky priest would comfort you with a bath
of green talc. *We are this triangle of men.*

Alewives swimming from the nostrils,
cicadas sounding in the advocate's canal of the right ear,
rheum lineaments touched
to the back of the politics of illness
that is becoming you.

Your strict friends sway, fires in an ocean
of ovation, and then in the lesser blood channels of the cats
while a large female tiger
casually circumambulates, drags
the dead deserter about by a glistening
knot of tendon with bluish muscle.

For this moment, Jackal, these collapsing saltimbanques of color
are just the tall phenomenon of rain
and that rain's secret protocol . . . Moloiel

pouring the dust of gold over balancing pans.

4.
The mosquitoes jumping now with the late hour
and I can hear
lions coughing below the pilasters.

They are scattering after fat cockroaches
over the limestone benches. Desperate, starved,

this winter they burrowed down into the catacombs
gnawing at the spun bones
of mummified Christians. These damn bureaucrats
would refuse soup to their mothers. Peter climbing
like an arrangement of chalk, pounding
from his side of the red wall
while curlews of silt fall from his hair and shoulders.

Caesar, who
loves these big cats, and all atmospheres of dejection,
walks off with a retinue
of lamps and virgins. *It is the day of the Ten.*

5.

—for Chris

The sick painter in a yellow bonnet
looks up while a meteor crosses the heavens, crashing
beyond the green hill. A figure of wet white smoke
seems almost spoken by the chimney. He worked so long

on his scaffolding, that he must
sit now in a tepid tub to separate
caked blood from his leather apron and trousers.

M. reminds us of the girl who was your mother.

Rome, in these leaf fires, is inscribable. It is
an Easter for bureaucrats and the half-dressed working women
of our avuncular palazzo and its pigeons.
They carry the dead by on litters. Torches

run from the city to the sea. I smell the approaching war cart
filled with fresh garlic. I wish
the ridicule that fell on the priest in the grotto
would come here and fall upon me. I wish this priest

in his torn work shirt would come and bathe me
in pungent spirits, the long cool alcohols
of cat piss tossed with straw. I wish, Caesar, you

would go wash yourself in the offals of the hour.
We are following a hunger of tigers

into some era of lost protocol:

As we fall, an ether falls with quick indulgences of pearl.

6.
I've admired the half-eaten pear
on the high mud shelf.
M. is drafting again at the table.

Without the matted brick of grasses
the trout would be cooked on dung—
elephant, tiger, even dog at one senator's
summer house? But
he had passed, of course, years
on the Nile.

There was a stabbing last night
at the open air cinema . . . Sicilian women
with brooms, who mistook the victim
for the villain, crushing his ribcage and skull.

There were more falling stars! The radical Indogen
Eckhart smiles . . .

I can covet a certain gown on a priest.
The pope, though,
seems to be a snow-laden tree to me.
Yes, a conifer.
We are now visualizing conifers,
a whole parking lot full of them—
in Paris, sad with one thin string of colored lights.

The Vatican secretary, putting aside his sacks of gold, walks
out into the cold sunlight
to feed individual leaves of lettuce to the browning of caged hares.

When the coliseum floors are excavated there is still
the running smells
of punk ozone, urine,
and the rotting roses of old iron.
The blood petals on the centurion's bare shoulder fall at last

to the mildewed straw.

Mother of god,
there are further semi-colons
in judgment? Sentences eschewing sentences?

The Moloiel bathing giant carp in waters of vinegar . . .

7.

—circa 1473

We are struggling now, jackal, to name you.

Unable to sleep, listening to the cries
of the millennial lion . . . what naked boy
did they share in this cometary garden light?

The papal secretary is gathering the sage of Corfu
into the milliner's sling that is over his shoulder.

The goats eating limestone above him
make a study of a long formation of blackbirds
arriving in North Korea the next morning.

Kore, where else, in hell with the boiling eels?

All the gold ponds of the tannery, like those coins
M. raked from the fountain
that the giraffe had urinated in,
early January . . . white ibis

now just climbing off the surface
of the watery terraces at Assisi.

The purple mackerel in its mouth
is not, *he says,*
the illusive mustache on the false pope to come

who, twice each day since childhood, has
shaved himself with a pat of chicken fat

and the full sanskrit edge of a clamshell.

KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL DISAPPEARING

The statues are congregating in the courtyard,
and the dolls are all staring at us. We're running

about. We're laughing in the shrubbery. What were we,
anyway, sixteen or so? Janet

asks. We must've been visiting someplace
important. I think it was the house

of an ex-president. And then we were reminded that alcohol
is a toxin. Roosevelt maybe, or Jefferson,

mounted under the shelf. Just to stand there
(*shhh!*) and to keep standing there, the room

doing flippy-flops. And not to be saying anything.
Nothing,
really. And Missy and Bobby, almost, out

in the field house. This's the old geography,
Mr. Cartouches said, organized and out-of-the-

way, yet totally accessible. Janet touches the mirror. Waves.
What an atrium, we thought, and this

embossed mirror to keep it all in place.
I wish I could remember where that was, and

had a set of directions.

HOT HOUSE HOTTENTOTS

And haven't the flowers been lovely, Jenny wanted to know,
leaning over the lilies, adumbrating one

afternoon, while at the same time effacing
others. Well, it's the environment, we decided.
Still though, it's easy
to hum along. And that's

what we were good at back then, 1970 something, with the sweep
of history there behind us.
And Jenny standing up

and turning the hose on. Spring, we decided,
and well-watered flora, make a wonderful
combination. Now let's see what else

we can get from the time machine . . . it's
a big blue day with puffy clouds
and Jenny's
undeterred and wearing a halter top. A fine coincidence,

the chorus decided, advancing
on the jasmine. Good thing there's lots of distance
there, and
vastly diminished versions of bigger things,

we thought. It's not the size of the ship
that matters, remember,
as audiences could identify
and began tapping their feet, while the lilies

dragged themselves through the condensation on the glass
and Jenny waved to some

boys from school. Well, more's always an option,
I guess, as we're wiping our brows, there
in the swell days,
with what's missing.

But something's always missing.

MONDAY MUSIC

Nobody, no one, not one, not a single one
hears me at the piano playing the white keys.

I make a truant sound.
I am as eloquent as anything

I heard in the world on Sunday.

Do you remember those conversations?
Accidental, repetitious as language in dreams?

I wonder why it is I know so little
about the black keys,

how they marry and come apart
in the history of a scherzo

or in the history of a scene
in which I play myself

playing only the white keys.

Sometimes I write myself
into a sheet of music paper

using the usual notations,
my little signs and jokes

of self disappearing.

White, white paper whites
bloom in winter.

There are white birches outside the house.
White crocuses in the snow.

The house is white too.

Above the door, on the lintel,
someone's carved the words,

Monday Music Club 1912.

Before the first war happened and the other wars,
the door swings open on its iron hinge

and there's no one at the piano.
Nobody, I tell you

as the door swings open.

SONGS AGAINST ENDING

The Fruitflies

Spinning lazily in the late sun, they hazard a surmise

The earth's sweet updraft this delicious death ascends

All things fall but some things rise:
sap, wings, the mote of light
in which the sweet pistil drifts like sugar on a string
also dust, to which sour humanness clings
and resinous musk, rotting tamarind
all that has been peeled back
all that has dissolved
or crystallized

How lovely to sip it

How lovely to sip it first with the prehensile mind

It comes in time
doesn't it

So why not wait and why not spin

Why not wait for it

The Worm

As she turns, she's pink as any inside girl
and then she's a boy and coiled and phallic

in the soil and she's sex without difference

sex which is moistness
sex which is beauty and fear

She's the perfect female and the perfect male

and as she slips she's eliding
into him and he's sliding into her
sex which is one sex and the same sex
and two sexes at the same time

Then sex lies still for three days in the garden
with another that is like itself but not itself

making a froth there, a bubbling slime
the transference of spermatozoa
each to each into the other

enough, they say, for five sets of hearts
each entranced in its segment

hearts enough to bear the cut
of selves or cells

the accidental wound

the severance

The Water Beetle

Old lumberer, lonely intruder

helmeted and hermetic
absurd as Agamemnon in your armature

how I fear cracking your skull
one night in the cellar

Why do you favor darkness, father?
Why are you kin, bachelor?

I know you're there
bearing the weight of your body

the shield and purpose of all your wandering

in this damp traverse
this world we share.

The Moths

Late October they hurry in
just before the rains begin

and they make themselves obscure against a wall

flattening in place like onion skins

or glassy flakes of coal
split off in sheets of fossil darkness

Furred brown or opalescent
seeking heat but not your heat

they pretend to be dead

until one day they are
more dead than pretending

folding in on themselves in a gesture
we recognize as a kind of clinging

to the consolation of form

A TRAVERSING

The easy parting of oaks and hickories,
bays of willows, borders of pine and screens
of bamboo down to the crux, grasses, bulrushes
and reeds parting down to their fundamental
cores, the yielding of murky pond waters,
layer upon layer giving way to the touch

of the right touch, the glassy, clear
spring waters, bone and gristle alike
opening as if opening were ultimate fact,
the parting of reflection allowing passage,
and the cold, amenable skeleton of echo,
the unlatching of *marsh* becoming as easily

accessible as the unlocking of *mercy*,
as the revelation of stone splitting
perfectly with the sound of the right
sound, everything, a nubbin of corn,
a particle of power, the epiphany of the sky
relenting, and the sea swinging open

like doors of a theater giving entrance
to everyone, no fences, no barriers, no blinds
to the parting of the abyss, not bolted,
not barred from the utmost offering
of the dusk, enigma itself falling away
until all may enter all and pass among them.

ROUTE 50

Like years, the desert
has no edges—red dust, red
dust condensed, busted ash—like years,
a corrupt uniformity we cut through.

*

Where miniature houses sail out
over shelves thrust up, where air breaks
down on rock, on conglomerate
that defines a sky.

*

Or dream dry salt seeps
from pores in your calves.

*

In one settlement, a headless
fire truck rusting by a shed, plastic
cowboys. In another, rancid
frozen confection.

*

One year, the lakes were too white
when we went by.

*

Where we go trailing
our own wake of glass, like years
we enter, enter again, stop seldom, and rest
in our own dust impressions.

FLOWERING TREE

Spring went swirling over the manmade world—

Oh blossom. Oh baby.

Right over a crate of dreaming trees,
iron weathercocks, robotic wires marching across the plain.

East, then crazy.

Overcast amplified green,

made citizens slowly stone-deaf to leaves,
lives tuned to the electric sky.

Win some.

Charming, the chiming mind.
If only as charming as the fence that was sifting.

Unknowingly.

It couldn't stop anything anyway.

Not the missile factory.
Not the storm: first spring bolts blitzkrieging the range.

And then some.

Everything faraway became a flowering tree.

So we named it: The Lost City
in Every Citizen.

Lost from

—petals pressed to everything.

HALF-NUMB FROM WINTER, ON A MORNING ALMOST WARM

Go for wisdom to the iris, beard
Like a Chinese sage
In a flutter of philosophy.
Let the tall tongue of the iris
Tell you what spring is—
Root of the rainbow; waterfall pouring itself
Into itself; cloud-rot before
The cautery of sun
Burning the season clean again.

How would the trees know, small leaves
In a spray of green wind?
Or the grass gone wild with rain? You can't hear
What the fat bees hum, too low for words.
And whatever the weeds say,
Don't listen.

Go ask the iris what spring means,
Thrusting up from its dirty heart.

SKUNK

1

A sudden stink so vast it seems some demon's
raised a spirit wall around the house.
And you say, *It's* in *the house!*

Its cuddle of color scuttling
in the basement? Its ill will
set against our snores?

Now the moving moon peers down
through a low barred window
to where a pelt of riddle

looms between the box the toaster came in
and the broken exercycle.

2

Nothing paces the meadow, nothing
tramples the brush, scurries
under the deck—

only
the stench of *could it be—?*
acrid and everlasting

films the air,
untouchable as moonlight.

3

The river leans against its bank,
the ocean obsessively reiterates itself,

the trees erect their trunks, unfold
their ebony branches

and a furry yearning
creeps out of the windbreak,

the skunk is foraging,
has foraged, will—

4

Jawbone and clavicle
strewn
beside the hot tub,

black boat of the sun
where the skunk is riding,
a streak of white light

down the center. . . .

1948: DIZZY'S FEZ

Under the lid,
that upturned pot,
that temple dome,

don't believe
it's mere Casbah—
eunuchs and wenches,

slow-toking pashas,
silks and mirrors
and knives of the moon,

a desperate appeal
in her soul-soaked eyes,
the wicked turn

and the exquisite symmetry
of his master plot
in which all

are equally foiled.
Well—lovely stuff.
But holding a space

in the round box
circle-squared,
the plan for another head:

the guards snoring fast asleep
or setting you free with apologies,
the eunuchs uncovering their sex

down in a last fold,
chasing the girls and each other
around the palace,

and the sultans with scimitar grins
sharing out the hash,
the somersaulting slave-dancer

telling stories till dawn
and never coming to an end
until the wise one nods.

Or it's a soft yard for a squirrel
who runs so fast,
branch after branch,

the tree bends and shakes,
a leaf flashes its underside,
another leaf falls still green,

there's no determining where he is
and where he's going next,
or if there's one or two or three of him,

and those nuts of his—
who can keep track of them?
They're in a treasure trove

along a root or hollow,
secret and exposed
as a thief's stash

of some hurried jewel,
the place the cops
never think of looking,

taking off their caps
and scratching their heads
while he keeps the lid on,

burning with it, sure,
something like a third eye
pressuring his brow,

but under his hat
awake in the dark,
still safe, inviolate.

ORACLE-BONE SCRIPT

In oracle-bone script, the character for *attunement*
is a series of bamboo pipes tied together with string;
if only I had the words to make things that accord
in tone vibrate together. Sunlight streams between slats
of a fence onto the ground. I gaze across the field,
notice how skunks have slipped into the neighbor's garden
and ravaged corn. At the mouth of an arroyo, someone
has drained engine oil into the sand, thrown quart
containers into the brush. "Goddamn," I whisper,
bending to pick cherry tomatoes, discover a large
grasshopper sunning on a branch. I imagine holding
a set of black-lacquered panpipes, blowing on them
for the first time in two thousand years. In the wobbly
beginning is a swish, then water trembling through bamboo,
tossed gravel, a dog's bark, throats slit, sleet,
footsteps, love-cries. I start as notes reverberate
in air, know frost shrivels the leaves into black bits.

X AND O

Someone flips a lit match off the road
near a cluster of cattails, takes
another swig of beer, presses on the gas;
the match is not specifically aimed
at you: you just happen to be there—
at a stop sign, in a parking lot,
on a ferry, at a terminal; as a lens
narrows sunlight to a point which blackens
into flame, go ahead, zero in, try
to x out a ball of jasmine sprig
that unfurls in boiling water, x out
a red-tail hawk shifting on a cottonwood
branch at dusk, x out coyotes yipping
as they roam by new moonlight up the road,
x out the dissolving suture threads
in your mouth, x out a dog's bark,
a baby magpie fallen from a nest
wandering on gravel, x out a flicker
feather in the mud; you can't x out
diarrhea, x out a barn erupted into flames,
x out firefighters lined up in trucks
along Russian olives, x out the burned
grass and stubs of fence posts, x out
a pang, place of birth or time of death,
x out, at an intersection of abscissa
and ordinate, dark matter that warps
space and time; you can't x out a cloud,
so make a lens of it the next time
you chop cilantro at a counter, the next
time you push through a turnstile.

REMAINS

Before the dog died, the vet took away
eight of his teeth. I'd have kept
each one, had I known
how soon the rest of him would go.

I'd have made a box for them
of his empty ribcage: God's
hand unhinged, stroking a head.
I'd have kept them

on my dresser, where instead
he looks straight
at me: black and white
of a stilled lens. He doesn't like
being dead. It's hard work

being the strong cloud
that stays the same.
Hard for him, not making a sound
as ashes gust from my hands.

THIS LIVING HAND

A strange? You'd call it a strange?
Yeh.
But it's a hand?
Yeh.

—Asomatognosia: rejected

ownership of a part of one's own body,
denied limb clung
somehow, alien, to the self:

When the stroke patient was asked,
Is this your hand?
Does it have another name?
She said, "It's a strange."

Why
mine, these half-drooped
lids & bulged veins,
dug-in hangnail & thrush-white tongue?
Why *mine* this lingual gyrus, this
substantia nigra—black
substance where dopamine's
held?

My father was the Circle of Willis,
little circuit of cerebral arteries
blocked, in him, by a single thrombus
thirty years ago, an
ailment not to be treated—

What flows in that circle now,
in his grave by the river in Macon?

What embalming fluid still drips through what shard of skull?

Every dream the hippocampus
& amygdala
haul back the memories they've hoarded,

in a frenzied criss-
cross of neural nets
(the six-columned
cortex abuzz with
the re-lived & never-
lived garble of story

& shocked-still freezeframes):

Now my father is leaving his study
where he's been for thirty years,
he's leaving his grave-suit & wedding-ring
& he's sober now, as if
for the first time,
& he tells me, *Oh, I know where you live,*
it's magnificent there,
but still I don't know how you stand it, it's unbearably

replete with so many conflicting illusions . . .

Is he
mine, now, when he comes out of my mind?

—See
here he is, this living
hand, this
strange: I hold it towards you.

THE ATOMS OF UNMEANING

Democritus, the Laughing Philosopher,
denied any purpose in the clash
of atom against atom,

in the patterns of their
hooks & barbs
as they snatch & disattach

into goatskin, Aegean surfwrack:
the thorned atoms of fire
& the smooth-grained

soul atoms. To know
that lust & grief & pleasure & dread
come only from the world's atoms

bumping randomly at the atoms of the soul
is to be freed of all heaviness,
Democritus said, & to live

in continuous bliss
amid the unmeaning
agitation of fire-thorn

toward globed
soul-grain, atom-
hook to void-barb, freed of significance: so, laughing.

Agha Shahid Ali, **Rooms Are Never Finished** (Norton, 2002)
Agha Shahid Ali, **Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals** (Norton, 2003)

Just about the time that the late Agha Shahid Ali was beginning to explore the intricacies of poetic form, his native Kashmir was erupting in political turmoil. That his turn toward form became one means of dealing with violent conflict is not only a paradox of literary history, but also one of several lessons he gave us in the uses of poetry in difficult times.

Although his 1991 volume contains one rhyming poem, it wasn't until *Country without a Post Office* (1997), which focuses on the Kashmir uprising begun in 1990, that formalism became his primary mode. Formal virtuosity continues to dominate *Rooms Are Never Finished*, in which, he tells us, the "ongoing catastrophe" of Kashmir becomes a "backdrop" to poems that foreground personal grief—and, in the process, explore and ultimately reconcile some deeper sources of political, emotional, and spiritual tension.

Shahid, as he was known by many who had never even met him, died in December 2001, just after *Rooms* appeared. The book itself begins and ends with the death of his mother, who becomes its central and reconciling sensibility. The prefatory poem, Shahid's second *canzone* to use "Kashmir" as one of the five end-words that the form requires the poet to repeat twelve times, is set in the United States, where his mother was being treated for cancer; but like many of his earlier poems set here, it is steeped in the sensibility of his homeland. The violently political and the touchingly personal cohabit the poem, from the opening lines on:

> The Hun so loved the cry, one falling elephant's,
> he wished to hear it again. At dawn, my mother
> heard, in her hospital-dream of elephants,
> sirens wail through Manhattan like elephants
> forced off Pir Panjal's rock cliffs in Kashmir:
> the soldiers, so ruled, had rushed the elephants . . . .

Later the poet refers to an elephant who "each year, on the day his mother / died . . . touches with his trunk the bones of his mother"; still later he asks: "Do you hear . . . in one elephant's / cry, by his mother's bones, the cries of those elephants // that stunned the abyss?"

This prefatory poem is followed by a twelve-part sequence that superimposes on the journey of the mother's body "From Amherst to Kashmir" an intricate collage of historical, religious, and literary offerings and allusions. Through its rich juxtapositions, the poem creates a world where there appears to be no conflict between Muslim and Hindu, between East and West; where Western form translates Eastern poems; where, against a landscape steeped in political strife, the common and powerful language is grief. The poem begins with a prose account of the death of Muhammad's grandson Hassain, important to all Shi'a Muslims and specifically to the poet's mother, who "since she was a girl" had felt the grief of Hassain's sister Zainab "as her own"; its third section introduces not only the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, whose work Shahid translated, but also a Hindu devotional song remembered from a black and white film. The Faiz poem so wonderfully referenced here ("'Memory'—two years after your death they tell me—has / no translation") is later translated (into Sapphics), as is a ghazal by the Urdu poet Ghalib; later the Hindu song ("Found on a 78 RPM") is rendered in stunningly lyrical tercets which address the "dark god Dark Krishna" as familiarly as the mourners in the poem address the God of Islam. These "translations" become threads in the intricate tapestry of the poem, as do recurrent images and fragments of myth and story. In the end, the American reader becomes so immersed in the poem that previously unfamiliar allusions have much the effect they do when English and American poetry is referenced (as it often is in Shahid's work).

If the conflicting religions of Kashmir comfortably share the landscape of the poem, religion itself leads to an exploration of deeper conflict. The poem moves, in its narrative sections, from an airplane "Above the Cities," to the "New Delhi Airport," to the "Srinigar Airport" in Kashmir, where, amid laments for his mother, the poet finds God "farther, farther from us, forever far," and the section ends: "The women break into / *There is no god but.*" The broken-off

quote is finished in the title of the next section, "God," a villanelle that repeats versions of the line "God then is only the assassin" and ends (with the God line omitted): "In no one's name but hers I let night begin." If Shahid's work reconciles conflicting religious traditions, it also opens for exploration a deeper tension between religious and secular sensibilities.

The latter dominates in the next section of the book, beginning with the title poem and its unexpectedly literal focus on interior decorating. Shahid's deeply appreciative depiction of the things of this world is pervasive here, where celebration replaces elegy, where love replaces grief. There's a great deal of humor in this section (the single line of a poem entitled "On Hearing a Lover Not Seen for Twenty Years Has Attempted Suicide" is "I suspect it was over me"); at its emotional center is "A Secular Comedy," in three parts. Written in the Sapphics that characterize much of the book, the poem recalls Dante's Western epic; but it moves from Heaven to Earth to Hell, with physical love featured in the middle section (where "Every door awaits a returning lover"), and a Sufi interpretation of the God/Satan myth in which Satan is seen as the ultimate lover of God explored in the last.

Following a translation of an eleven-part poem by Mahmoud Darwish, the book ends with a poem that more obliquely references *The Divine Comedy* by creating a short counterpart to James Merrill's Dantean *Changing Light at Sandover*. The poem revisits the mother's death amid political turmoil ("There's only news of blood out there in Kashmir"), conflating Eastern and Western traditions in what seems to be a Dantean visit to the underworld; but the poem is titled "I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the *Only* World" (italics mine), and it takes the poet to the house in Amherst where his mother died. The poem thus secularizes the otherworldly theologies of both Western and Eastern religion; but partly through the medium of poetry, it integrates spirituality as well. "Again the air awaits 'Morning Mood' or a ghazal // to be what survives after sacrilege," he says near the end of the poem, identifying himself, a few lines later, as "Still among the devout." The poetry that survives includes "the Urdu of Ghalib . . . the Persian / of Hafiz," which the mother was "still able to quote" at the end of her life; but it also includes James Merrill, whose posthu-

mous presence represents not only Western poetry, but also the secular love referenced in the "Rooms" section of the book. Merrill speaks in capital letters, as the dead do in his own long poem, and he has the last words in Shahid's book: "SHAHID, HUSH. THIS IS ME, JAMES. THE LOVED ONE ALWAYS LEAVES."

Merrill speaks in other ways as well. The rhyming poem in Shahid's 1991 book has an epigraph from Merrill, who was largely responsible for his turn to formalism in the 1990s. The 1997 book uses terza rima and rhyming quatrains, both of which are repeated in *Rooms Are Never Finished*, and includes a sestina, a villanelle, a canzone, and a pantoum. *Rooms* repeats most of these (appropriately using terza rima in the final poem), and adds a number of poems and sections in Sapphics. Both books also feature several ghazals in the Persian form, which combines rhyming with the obsessive repetition of the fixed forms mentioned above, and which Shahid imported from his native culture into English, where, in this "strict" version, it has in a few short years become one of "ours."

This is no small accomplishment; it is difficult to think of anyone in recent literary history who has done anything quite like it. Like the ghazals translated by William Stafford and Adrienne Rich in 1969, which were widely imitated for their use of autonomous couplets, Shahid's earlier (and incidentally his later) translations of ghazals do not adhere to the form; it was only after he had begun using rhyme and meter in other poems that he began to write formal ghazals. Around 1996, he explained the form to a number of poets, invited them to use it, and produced an edited volume of the results, *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*, which appeared in 2001. That book is one testimony to Shahid's lasting effect on American poetry; another is his own posthumous book of ghazals, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*.

Shahid's attraction to the ghazal was primarily but not simply cultural. In his canzones, he only occasionally uses homonyms as a way of dealing with excessively repeated words; more centrally, he presents the same words in constantly shifting contexts. The ghazal, with its non-linear and theoretically interchangeable couplets, demands this kind of shift. For a poet who personally and poetically embodies an astonishing multi-culturalism, this can produce quite

dazzling and far-reaching results. Thus, for example, the twelve couplets of "In Arabic" open out to embrace Jewish literature, poets writing in Spanish, and bisexuality at the same time they celebrate the language of Shahid's own religion. Here are a few of its couplets:

> Writes Shammas: Memory, no longer confused, now is a homeland—
> his two languages a Hebrew caress in Arabic.
>
> When Lorca died, they left the balconies open and saw:
> On the sea his *qasidas* stitched seamless in Arabic.
>
> In the Veiled One's harem, an adulteress hanged by eunuchs—
> So the rank mirrors revealed to Borges in Arabic.
>
> Ah, bisexual Heaven: wide-eyes houris and immortal youths!
> To your each desire they say *Yes! O Yes!* in Arabic.
>
> I too, O Amichai, saw everything, just like you did—
> In Death. In Hebrew. And (Please let me stress) in Arabic.

Many of the ghazals in the book are not so culturally pressing, but the fusion of Western and Eastern poetic traditions that characterizes so much of Shahid's work is even more explicit here. Many of these poems were written for poet friends, and embody many of their lines; these mingle with allusions to Shakespeare, Stevens, Dickinson, James Wright, and numerous other Western and non-Western poets, all of whom slip into the context of the poems as if they were part of ordinary discourse, as indeed they were for Shahid.

The book performs other acts of reconciliation as well. The titles of the poems (which are usually the repeated word or phrase that ends the second line of the couplet) suggest an effort to deal generously with contraries: "In Real Time" and "For Time" are balanced by "Forever"; poems are written "For You" and "After You," but also "About Me." "In Arabic" includes couplets revised from an earlier "Arabic," but it is also balanced by "Beyond English." The four elements are explored: in "Even the Rain," the speaker asks "How did the Enemy love you—with earth? air? and fire? / He held just one

thing back till he got even: the rain"; in the book there are poems "Of Fire" and "Of Water," as well as "Land," "Water," and, like a light breath, the two stanzas of "Air."

Published a year after the book that lamented his mother's death from brain cancer, the book of ghazals was largely written while Shahid was suffering from the same fatal illness, confronting, even more than the previous book, the ultimate human conflict between life and death. "I have come down to my boat to wish myself *Bon Voyage,*" he says in "Of Fire"; referencing his last book as well as his beloved Emily Dickinson in "In," he declares: "Doomsday is over, Eden stretched vast before me— / I see the rooms, all the rooms, I am to die in." But poignant as these lines are in the context of Shahid's death, what dominates the book is a celebration of poetry, the life force that seems, in Shahid's hands, capable of uniting emotional, religious, and political contraries. Enriched by its reference to both the American novel and the Islamic version of the Abraham story, in which Ishmael rather than Isaac is offered as a sacrifice, the last couplet of "Tonight" brings together religion and literature as well as East and West: "And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee— / God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight."

"My Word" ends with the poet speaking to himself: "Yours too, Shahid, will be a radical departure. / You'll go out of yourself and then into my word." Which is where this deeply generous poet continues to live for us, more vital than ever in a time when our own nation is about to embark on a war which, in its contempt for the religion and culture of what it has come it see as its enemy, seems no less a religious one than the conflict in Kashmir. To experience the beauties of an Islamic culture through the words of a man so deeply committed to cultural complexities is to counter, if only a little, the crass simplicities that are being handed to us daily. "O wailing Wall O Holy Sepulchre O Far Mosque," he cries in a single line. Agha Shahid Ali's poetry, like his life and death, was a radical departure from and a potentially life-giving antidote to the complacent pieties of our time.

Martha Collins

RISKS AND REWARDS

Gabriel Gudding, **A Defense of Poetry** (Pittsburgh, 2002)
Ellen Bryant Voigt, **Shadow of Heaven** (Norton, 2002)

Reading these two books, one a first collection, the other a sixth, helped remind me that we bring quite different expectations to the works of younger and older poets. From the former we expect freshness, risk, even impudence, the reckless abandon that new beginnings can bestow. Every new talent will be derivative to some degree, but first book poets are understandably anxious to cut loose, to demonstrate raw energy and invention that they hope will separate them from the work of predecessors. They may even have to try a little too hard to show that they are distinctive, especially in our crowded current poetic scene.

Mature poets have presumably resolved issues of influence and originality to their own—and others'—satisfactions. From them we expect a secure poetic voice and identity, and we look for development, ripening, the concentration that can come through familiarity with the craft and the cumulative lessons of life experience. Now the fear may be not so much that of excessive influences as of one's own accomplishments. One's best efforts from the past may rise up and seem to overshadow the newer work. How many times have you said "I didn't like her new book as much the one before it" or "I think he's really starting to repeat himself"? We want older artists, insofar as we and they still subscribe to the heritage of the modernist aesthetic, to break new ground, to be unwilling to stay in a groove that has become a rut. We measure them against their previous best and hope for equivalent or better. With first books, then, we speculate on where the artist may be headed; with later works we consider how they got to where they are, less concerned with where they may head next. Gabriel Gudding and Ellen Bryant Voigt are very different poets, and part of that difference stems from their different ages and the different stages at which we find them pursuing their careers.

*

Gudding is happy to be silly. He's out for fun, and his *A Defense of Poetry* is a kind of spree of parodies, burlesques and slapstick com-

edy. He brings Tate and Ashbery to mind; perhaps even more, he recalls the late Kenneth Koch, whose ear for parody could be unerring ("Hiram, I think the sump is backing up" begins the great Frost parody, "Mending Sump"). Koch was more given to understatement, though; that Frost parody is deliciously deadpan. Gudding is prone to jumping up and down and waving frantically to us. Perhaps "burlesque" is a better term than "parody" for the kind of literary send-ups he delights in:

> AFTER YEATS
>
> When I am old and using Revlon hair dye
> and am sucking up my pharmacopoeia,
> and can drink but Sanka—
> when I don't have too many friends anymore
> and the bathroom is a place of loneliness—
>
> Yes, when I am old and Revloned and hypnogogic
> and nodding at the wheel,
> take down this book
> and read of one who phoned you less and less,
> but who dug you and remembered
> your elegant hand
> and somewhat geeky look.

This is good fun for the way it appropriates our dopey culture of telephones, medications, and brand names, and for the comment on Yeats's late Victorian lyrics, which shove the mundane world aside in order to create a place where someone can hide his face amid a crowd of stars. Those poems are rather an easy target, one that Yeats himself came to take potshots at, but why not let Gudding indulge in a vigorous comic updating that makes room for words like "Sanka" and "geeky"? His long delay of a rhyme, "book" to "look," also recalls the kind of fun with rhyme deferred by syntax that Ogden Nash used to have. One could cavil here and there—I seriously doubt that the Revlon joke is worth repeating—but most of us are apt to read it, smile, and move on.

Whether we will return is another question. We may, if we want to share the poem with someone we know will be amused by it. But I would be more likely to show someone Andrew Hudgins' "The Wild Swans Skip School," which manages to parody Yeats and Gwendolyn Brooks in a small frame simultaneously: "We beat wings. We / fly rings. We // scorn Yeats. We // have mates. We // won't stay. We / fly way." Again, that's a lot more deadpan and concentrated.

Gudding does Walt Whitman ("To an Oklahoma in Winter"), Richard Wilbur, and, at what seems to me unnecessary length and with counterproductive slapstick, Robert Lowell. Tennyson comes up as well, and Gudding's take on "The Charge of the Light Brigade" develops a nice intensity:

> And into our verve and almost groupie love
> the whole chalked world of mineral flew
> toward our gadundering horses, bilious jaws, twirling
> flecks of ligament, spattered fetlocks: nothing dry now:
>
> Big teeth sprayed in prisms. Here and there a billiard-like eyeball
> had lost its horse, everywhere
> the severed tails, pinging flock of knuckle-
> balling shrapnel, again the flogging whirl
>
> and piebald smacks of shell, blood sponged deep
> in pelisses of fur, & lots of bullion braid spattered filthy. Oh fuck me
> what glory! and all I said, God love me,
> when they
>
> tried to break the trot and charge,
> was "Steady! Steady the 17th Lancers!"
> and there was no long charge that day
> we *trotted*
>
> through the valley of death. Trotted
> through grape, great shot, volleys that plumed
> in gristle.
> But we would not hustle.
> ("Charge of the L.B.")

This doesn't only send up Tennyson, who is far too easy a target by now; in addition it re-imagines the battle, not only through the idiotic pride of the military mind, but in the carnage and physical horror, borrowing from film techniques of close-up and slow-motion and working with vivid but precise language. Gudding loves odd words like "gadundering," and he uses them craftily when he's working at his best.

That best does not include all the obsession with butts, farts, and rectums this book displays, e.g. "Poem Imploring the Return of My Butt," "On the Rectum of Peacocks," "My Buttocks," "Statement" ("I have felt for some time that I am writing inside a butt"), etc. At my advanced age, I can't help thinking of this as schoolboy humor, something to outgrow. Surely there's a difference between the savage energy of the Light Brigade poem and something like this:

> My sister runs through the door farting.
> As she gallops down the hallway farting
> she grows steadily lighter
> until at last she is lifted upward
> by the propulsion
> from her anus.
>
> ("The Atheist Gnat")

I'm not sure that Gudding's mission to "reclaim the tasteless," as the book jacket has it, is all that laudable. He has found a fine publisher and has won the Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize (a poem on *her* butt would presumably enhance his pursuit of the tasteless), but if he is going to grow as a writer he's going to need to find ways to harness his postmodernist aesthetic to worthier steeds and deeper feelings. He may be right about "the vanity of poetry" needing the same kind of deflation as "the vanity of war" (the back jacket again), but if poems are worth writing and reading they need to salvage value while they also lay about them destructively. The Robert Lowell poem may demolish the vanity that underlies *Life Studies*, but it has nothing, really, to offer in the way of replacement. There may be equivalent vanity in dismissing your predecessors if you can't beat them at their own game. If you are committed to writing and pub-

lishing poems, you can't escape the essential connection between the risks of lyric poetry—sentiment, personal feeling, a certain obsessiveness—and the need for value. That is the task that Gudding faces, and I wish him the best of luck.

*

To someone like Gudding, Ellen Bryant Voigt might seem to be a cautious and plodding sort. Her poems perform their insights quietly, building steadily and modestly, their music exact but delicate. Never flamboyant, she is not afraid to face the charge of calm good taste or careful craftsmanship, and she writes with a confidence born of experience, a testing of poetic form and language, that has left her very much in charge of her artistic resources and responsibilities.

Here is her new book's opening poem:

LARGESSE

Aix-en-Provence

Banging the blue shutters—night-rain;
and a deep gash opened in the yard.
By noon, the usual unstinting sun
but also wind, the olive trees gone silver,
inside out, and the slender cypresses,
like women in fringed shawls, hugging themselves,
and over the rosemary hedge the pocked fig
giving its purple scrota to the ground.

What was it had made me sad? At the market,
stall after noisy stall, melons, olives,
more fresh herbs than I could name, tomatoes
still stitched to the cut vine, the soft
transparent squid shelved on ice; also,
hanging there beside the garlic braids,
meek as the sausages: plucked fowl with feet.

Under a goose-wing, I had a violent dream.
I was carrying a baby and was blind,

or blinded on and off, the ledge I walked
blanking out long minutes at a time.
He'd flung a confident arm around my neck.
A spidery crack traversed his china skull.
Then it was not a ledge but a bridge, like a tongue.

From the window over my desk, I could look down
at the rain-ruined nest the *sangliers*
had scrabbled in the thyme, or up, to the bald
mountain in all the paintings. I looked up.
That's where one looks in the grip of a dream.

First things first. If the music of this poem isn't apparent to you, or feels muted, try reading it aloud. You'll pick up on the expertly managed loose blank verse, and you'll notice a lot of fine sounds and sound-relationships. It is delicious to say, measured and dance-like, alive to the pleasures of the mouth. Such craft does not come easily.

Granting the music, can't we still ask whether this isn't just a nice person's memoir of a moment in a familiar sort of vacation? The foreign setting, the pleasures of the market place, the report of a dream and some violent weather: isn't it still just a fairly routine rendering of a familiar kind of experience? I would say no. I think the poem leaves a great deal out and surprises us with what it puts in and the sudden turns it takes. It makes me ponder the excesses of weather and their curious relation to the cornucopia of the market. Since the sun returns and the speaker can move from the world of night-rain and gashed yard to the reassurance of the sun and the rich display of produce, she wonders why she is still sad. The answer, it seems to me, is that nature's excesses, whether positive or negative, do not connect easily with the experience of being human. An abundance of herbs is delightful, but it also means that they remind us both of our need for names and of our incomplete store of them. The market brings a steady undercurrent of distress; the vines must be cut if the tomatoes are to be brought there, the soft squid iced, the garlic braided, and the fowl plucked and hung into meekness. Awareness of the cost makes the speaker uneasy, and she retreats to her inner world and her dream.

The transition to dream world fascinates me. I do not know whether the dream is recalled from the previous stormy night or comes later, after the market visit. I expect the introductory phrase, "Under a goose-wing, I had a violent dream," to read "goose-down," locating the dreaming in an expected place. When it is a wing instead I have a sudden sense of mystery. Does this have to do with plucked fowl in the market? Is it the nautical term (a goose-wing is a kind of sail)? Are we already in the dream world from "Under" on, so that we have a kind of dream within a dream? I enjoy my uncertainty.

And the dream itself is rendered beautifully, to my mind. The blindness, the baby, the canny adjectives—*confident, spidery, china*—all sketch in quickly the feeling of dreams, their odd power and resonance. Then in the last stanza we think she's back in the waking world, where the window over her desk shows her the place where wild boars (the word *sangliers* has a more primitive and menacing feel, of course) had made a nest and had it devastated by the storm. But this is dream too, with Mt. Saint Victoire looming up as in a Cézanne painting. Or is it aftermath? The last line is ambiguous. One can be dreaming when "in the grip of a dream," or one can be held by its lingering power after one has awakened. In either case, the poem suggests, one looks up, to the mountain, rather than down, to the boar's nest. Did I say boar's nest? That is another one of this poem's anomalies, things that make it more complex than it might seem at first.

I find it difficult to explain my own heartfelt assent to that last line. I know it has something to do with the exactness of the verb-noun "grip." It has something to do with our sensing, at times, that dreaming and waking are not opposites, not mutually exclusive. It surely has to do with the fragile ways in which we link our human reality to the larger reality of the world, its storms, boars, mountains, geese, and all its other mysteries. It has to do with the chthonic truths we look down to, pocked figs like scrota, rain-ruined nests in fragrant thyme, and to the opposing impulse that makes us look upward rather than earthward for help, dream-gripped.

The world resists our proclivity for worship and hope. The cypresses are only *like* women in fringed shawls. A ledge may become a bridge, but it will only be *like* a tongue, never identical. The bald

mountain may fill our paintings, but it will finally be itself alone, aloof and distant. In "Himalaya," a poem that commemorates the death of a poet friend's mother and then the death of the poet himself, Agha Shahid Ali, the mountain is transformed to a gigantic grave, a visionary place where snow is fine as smoke and the only quickened shapes are trees, a poem cast in the form of a ghazal and full of glancing allusions to Ali's work.

Perhaps I'm reading too much into this poem, but the point is that by its careful withholdings, its deft moves and juxtapositions, and its calculated suggestiveness, it produces a strong response and a sense of wonder. A mature poet has learned which moves work and which don't. The result is something we can trust, can return to, can have an increasingly fruitful interaction with. It's difficult for beginning poets to work with this kind of authority and exactitude.

Young poets don't carry a teetering load of memories. They may lose a friend or a parent, but they tend to feel wonderfully immortal. Older poets, living increasingly in a junkyard of loss and illness, carry a constant consciousness of death. In my first book I could personify death, introducing it into my world insouciantly. It's impossible to do that now. Memory and mortality are finally having their way with me. I turn, then, with gratitude to *Shadow of Heaven*. Voigt's book is streaked and mottled, as is only natural, by an elegiac sense that is impossibly intertwined with her sense of beauty. Loss is loss, but it isn't simply sorrow. It colors her existence and enlarges her consciousness. If it's cause for complaint, it's somehow also occasion for wonder.

Family relations form a natural center of Voigt's life and work, and this book has two powerful central sequences. "The Garden, Spring, the Hawk" is addressed to her sister in Virginia while the poet is residing in Louisiana, a kind of letter that is also a journal. "The Art of Distance" is a meditation on life and death that has her father at its center, a poem that draws on her natural storytelling skills to relate events as diverse as the death of a snake and the triumphant bicycle ride of a crippled uncle. Both sequences shimmer with her complex response to the natural world, finding language that releases, again and again, a renewed sense of awe and apprehension:

Like a struck match: redbird, riding the wet
knuckle of the longest limb of the leafless water oak,
pitching glissandi over the myrtle trees. The yellow cat,
one paw leveraged out of the soggy grass, then another,
has nothing to do with this: too slow, too old.
Nor the night-stunned snakes under the log, a cluster of commas;
nor the cloistered vole, the wasp, the translucent lizard,
the spider's swaddle of gauze, waiting to quicken.
This hour belongs to the birds—where I am,
single ripe berry on the bush; where you are,
Cooper's hawk, on the rail fence, dressing her feathers;
and the indistinct domestics at their chores.

This is the first section of the first sequence, and its leisurely expertise is deceptive, especially when one comes back to it from a reading of all fifteen poems in the sequence and realizes how deftly it sets forth themes and subjects to come. What any poet, beginning or experienced, might learn from it is the way the personal can be submerged, imperceptibly and steadily, in the life of the world around it. Whether the self "has nothing to do with this," visitor that it is, both to Louisiana and to the nonhuman world in general, is the issue both "domestic" sisters, one studying the cardinal, the other the Cooper's hawk, can face separately and together. The sure situating, of people and creatures and a natural world of change and constancy, feels effortless. But the matrix it forms for complex meditation is a mark of Voigt's strong achievement and her deeply coherent poetics.

*

It's probably clear by now that I think Voigt is some distance ahead of Gudding in terms of the pleasure and wisdom she affords. Not everyone will agree with me. A reader whose judgment I respect recently told me that the Voigt book was, in her view, "kind of sentimental." The Gudding book, which she had also read, struck her as better.

This led to some pondering on my part. My friend is younger, so I wondered if I was looking at a generational difference. Then too there was the first-book versus sixth-book difference. Our culture is pretty youth-oriented these days, and lots of people look for the

newest and latest in the arts, expecting that they will get it from younger artists.

I decided, though, that it was really more a matter of taste. Voigt's poetry is experience-based, which certainly means that she runs the risk of sentimentality, of privileging her moments of loss and love among family and friends, her difficult memories. Many people are reacting sharply these days against this side of the lyric tradition. While I fight shy of a lot of experience-based poetry, and am open to its alternatives, Voigt convinced me that she knows how to manage her subjects, drawn from her life, in truly impressive ways.

Gudding's poems, meanwhile, are a good deal more impersonal. That leaves him more room for wit and horseplay, not to mention some political anger and some occasional pathos, both of which find a place in his work. The risk he runs, and doesn't altogether escape in my view, is that of triviality, of surface without depth. But, again, his is a first book. He is finding out what his talent can do. I should mention poems that I think promise more depth, such as "Adolescence" and the clearly more personal "Daybook to Oyster, His Infant Daughter."

Both poets write about other poets. Voigt has a poem about Larry Levis, who was obviously a good friend, and the warmth of her feeling and the richness of her perspective are attractive to me. Some readers, I recognize, might feel left out. The poem for Agha Shahid Ali runs similar risks. Voigt faces them successfully, to my mind. Meanwhile, Gudding risks my impatience with his elaborate send-ups of Wilbur and Lowell and Whitman; he sometimes hits his target, sometimes misses wildly.

Both poets achieve a combination of pathos and comedy. I said that Gudding begins to achieve it in "Adolescence," but I think Voigt does it better, as in this poem from her book's final section:

PLAZA DEL SOL

This is a veterans' ward, here by the pool
in Florida, where every chaise is taken, every frame
stretched out to full extension, the bodies just removed

from cold storage, exposing to light and air
the wound, the scar, the birthmark's crushed grape,
contiguous chins undisguised by pearls,
pitted shoulders plumped or scapular, flesh
pleated along an upper arm, a vast loaf rising
out of the bathing bra, or chest collapsed
and belly preeminent, spine a trough
or a knotted vine climbing the broad cliff-wall.
Down from this pelvic arch five children came;
that suspicious mole, his mother kissed;
but who will finger such calves, their rosaries?
Here's a brace of ankles like water-balloons;
here's a set of toes shingled with horn.
Here is the man, prone, whose back is a pelt,
and the supine woman whose limbs are tinkertoys,
and the man whose tattooed eagle looks crucified,
and his brother with breasts, and his wife with none—
a woman tanned already, dried fruit arranged on a towel—
and her pale sister, seated, bosom piled in her lap,
oiling the lunar landscape of her thighs.
The hot eye over all of them does not turn away
from bodies marooned inside loose colorful rags
or bursting their bandages there at the lip of the cave—
from ropy arms, or the heavy sack at the groin,
or the stone of the head—bodies mapped
and marbled, rutted, harrowed, warmed at last,
while everyone else has gone off into the sea.

There is no idealizing here, no hand-wringing, and no mercy. The figurative language does not disguise the truth; again and again (tinkertoys, dried fruit, lunar landscape, heavy sack) it exposes and underlines it. I find the poem comical and heartbreaking. Is that a function of my years? It carries some uncomfortable truths, but if I could brace myself to those truths, I'd surely experience the comedy and the heartbreak at any age.

The kind of layered and textured account that we get from such

poems produces a complexity of tone that may finally be the opposite of sentimentality. Deep feeling, yes; exploitation of that feeling or excessive claims for its importance, no. Risk, and then the rewards of risk: the impossible capture in words of experiences we thought lay beyond them.

David Young

IN TROUBLED TIMES

Mary Baine Campbell, **Trouble** (Carnegie-Mellon, 2002)
Kevin Prufer, **The Finger Bone** (Carnegie-Mellon, 2002)
Joy Katz, **Fabulae** (Southern Illinois University Press, 2002)

Let us pause and praise what poems do. They give us our lives back, back from the anxiety and anger of the larger world, from local and global forces that overwhelm us. In our culture the pressure to do, to do more, to do faster, nudges us continually; like fish suspended in current, we manage to press on with our fishy business. We are conscious too of the push of time and ordinary mortality that is to some degree ever-present to the sensible body. And like an electrical current running through our collective mind, the daily news often brings us the shadow of extraordinary mortality, as now, early in 2003, when global events loom and gain momentum.

Poems allow us, if just for the moment we read them, to savor our little time, our loves and fevers, even in the face of these pervasive forces. It is no small accomplishment; indeed, it is an achievement with moral dimensions. Poems famously speak out about war, about oppression, about political greed, and that is of course a great opportunity, of which poets like Allen Ginsberg and Denise Levertov have made excellent use. But another function poetry can serve, at least briefly, is the release from the ache of living on a planet that our kind is ravaging, in a world that is rushing to war. There are many ways poems nourish us, but this one comes readily to mind these tense days. And if some poems retreat from the world altogether, that doesn't seem a bad thing. A few minutes of poetry can return us to our struggles in the world with a little more strength and resilience.

Some poems balance on the border between personal refuge in the physical world and the knowledge that such refuge is temporary and tenuous. They're firmly grounded in the sensuous details of the moment, yet they acknowledge the powerful forces that could impinge at any time. Three such poems have caught my attention in recent weeks. Each uses the metaphor of storm, and each is set outdoors, where storms happen.

The second poem in Mary Baine Campbell's new collection *Trouble*, "Calm Before the Storm," is clearly of two minds:

CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Between the Brattle and the bookstore
A hundred yards of wet brick pavement
Fancy with yellow leaves: I wore
A red jacket, carried a red umbrella
Had a little fever, had a little cough
Was alive, passed a newspaper box
Saw no wars in the headlines
Had no bad news from the doctor
Not yet, was alive, was in love
Had waterproof boots on, it was only
A few yards to the bookstore
On an autumn night, the bookstore
Full of good books and yellow light, I was
Still alive, there was no evidence
Of terminal illness, there were no wars
In the headlines, I have always
Loved the fall the beautiful dead
Bodies of the leaves scattered
On the battlefield of earth and my own
Life persisting.

This poem's enactment of a few moments of a life is steeped in suspense and ends in welcome anticlimax. It clings to the images that present themselves—boots and books, bricks and leaves. That the innocence of this perspective is frail and gets frailer as we read is one source of the poem's emotional effect. The speaker's relief at what is not in the headlines, for instance, is tempered by the knowing line break ("no wars / in the headlines"), suggesting that there are many wars not reported in headlines (or elsewhere in the newspaper, for that matter). The tiny word *yet* also contributes to the effect: "Had no bad news from the doctor / Not yet." And of course the closing metaphor in which the sidewalk is littered with bodies brings the poem teetering to the edge of outright war and its dreadful cost.

"Calm Before the Storm" is a poem of survival against implicit odds. It is a temporary permit to live. Like the speaker I am grateful for the reminder that I'm alive, I persist, in this moment, and this one.

Here is another poem of anticlimax. It's from another second book, Kevin Prufer's *The Finger Bone*.

OUTDOOR CAFÉ, APPROACHING STORM

My mouth wants a handful of coins to fill it.
Somewhere, a car alarm sings to passersby.

The slamming of townhouse doors, the dip in the engine-whine
as a bus shifts gears, the thrum of airplanes over the city—

Sometimes, I have nothing to say. My tongue wets over
but my mouth is empty. A crow might pick a bit of foil

from the storm drain near a wheel rut. A crow
might simmer into the air—

———

All travel ends in a glass city, a city
built as if of water. Like fishermen's nets,

the crows rise, a black grid,
each in their pink beaks—a glistening.

When I open the menu, too many wings
so the street hazes over with down. The wind always fails

to bring a storm. Everything has been said so well
I cannot do better.

The movement of the first section is similar to Campbell's, as the speaker takes refuge in the immediate, in the physical details of the things around him. Then the voice falters; the poem breaks, just after

delivering an image supported by a well-chosen, striking verb. How clearly "simmer" evokes those awkward first few bounces and wing-beats of a crow launching itself from the ground; that this success is abandoned suggests but does not define the speaker's central issue, which emerges explicitly in the last two lines. No, this is not a poem that rescues us. The failure to be like the crows, to fill one's mouth with a bit of glitter, to simmer into the air—that failure is keenly felt (and, ironically, expressed).

After the section break, the crows are disturbing presences—a storm in themselves—throwing dark nets over the landscape and hazing the streets. The speaker is mute with self-doubt, and something is wrong with the world. There is no escape.

In the third poem I'll quote, the storm has passed, though it lingers in a shivering child. This is Joy Katz's poem "Café," from *Fabulae*, her first book.

CAFÉ

A downpour has ended and now the peaceful,
steady kind of light that's after,
little spits of rain left in the wind still.
A child,
crying and crying hysterically, until he is shuddering
convulsively, leaves off, and when this happens
the same feeling of steadiness. He sits across from his mother,
shivering every now and then.
In a minute he will return to his drawing.

If you are with someone who does not say anything to you,
who does not touch you or ask anything of you
but goes on sitting across from you and after a time
goes back to her book, that's grace.
It returns the world
already in progress: steaming milk, opening newspapers.
And a man walks in carrying a birdcage.

Here's a moment of steadiness, recovered from the squalls of rain

and of child—a refuge. The poem's omniscience (knowing, for instance, that the child will return to the drawing) adds to the comfort of this moment. And then the delicious definition, which is introduced in such a way that it doesn't announce itself as definition, brings grace down to earth. It is not mysterious, for this moment, but rather a matter of being completely comfortable with another person, simply and clearly in tune, accepted and accepting.

But grace is not static, a state of arrested motion. "It returns the world / already in progress"—first the local world, the cappucino and business of cups, and soon the larger and darker world, through the newspapers even now being unfolded. Just as the private is about to give way to the public, the poem surprises us with a man carrying a birdcage—a surprising move. I am grateful that poems can make me laugh.

I know Mary Campbell, and the other two poets were students of mine in the M.F.A. program at Washington University in St. Louis. I didn't quote them here for that reason but because the poems spoke to me in a particular way. I'd been noticing the "public" aspect of many poems I've encountered in the past year, and trying to reconcile that with the other uses of poems. These three books helped me to do that.

Of course poems can not only give us our own lives back, they can give us other lives as well. Katz's "From the Forest of Canes" is in the persona of Precious Consort T'ien, Kangsai, 1931, whose traditional foot-binding was ordered to be reversed. Prufer gives us "Spin-Out," which invites us, briefly, into the lives of two boys lounging outside a pool hall, throwing bottlecaps at the wheels of their pick-up, one of them remembering a bad accident he had in it. Campbell's hilarious "Cruella" brings us into the point of view of the infamous Disney character, who wears a coat of puppy skins and imagines herself to be an astrological sign.

But the newspaper is unfolding. Given where we are historically, I am sure that I will be reading many poems that take on our difficult world directly in political and social terms this spring, and I welcome them. I welcome too the poem which, while acknowledging our great troubles, nonetheless gives me a moment's respite.

Pamela Alexander

THE REAL STORY

Robert Thomas, **Door to Door** (Fordham, 2002)

Two-thirds of the way through Robert Thomas's strong first collection, an inventive prose poem begins as follows: "Lights come on in apartments above the shop windows as a man talks to himself along Judah Street. He is the narrator of the novel. He orders a hot piroshki from the Russian bakery and devours it before he has gone a block. 'Who does she think she is, staring at me from her nail salon? Is it my fault she has no customers? How can I concentrate on my work when I am under constant surveillance?'" This might be taken as the beginning of an actual novel, given its rhythms and precise sense of detail, though the self-consciousness of the second sentence is a bit disconcerting. The next paragraph, though, makes clear that we are not inside the novel but outside it, or rather somewhere teasingly in-between:

> The man performs interesting, important work. Though its nature is never revealed, it is crucial to the novel that its significance be credible. Perhaps he is a poet lost in the novel's urban labyrinth, a counterintelligence agent employed by the wind shear. The streetcar tracks are still slick from an earlier rain as he crosses, guilty that his girlfriend will be hurt that he is not bringing anything home for dinner. "Why should I? We have Sunday's soup, kidney beans like rubies in mud and ziti, pasta like the small white eggs of amphibians. Yes, that's it, an amphibian! That's just how I feel...."

The narrative consciousness is at once keenly alert to image and nuance and strangely unable to shape the story effectively: the narrator doesn't seem to have made basic decisions about his protagonist ("Perhaps he is a poet..."), whose own thoughts keep wandering off down blind alleys of association. As the story proceeds, the details are crystalline, evocative, persuasive—and yet they don't accumulate to fit the usual contours of plot and character. The man launches into an urgent but incoherent prayer: "Give us our salt and our uninsur-

able shelter. Lead us not onto the third rail. Show us thy window, Mother, behind the rusted shutters. Show us the secret fingering." Looking for cohesive narrative here, we'd be frustrated, even annoyed.

Thomas is not, of course, an inept fiction writer but a first-rate poet, and this poem—its title, by the way, is "Why I Am Not a Novelist"—is slyly instructive about the distinctive nature of his work. Here's the final paragraph:

> A scent of mint haunts the railing as he finally walks up the stairs. When he opens the door, he hears the television in the back room playing strange music, like a Tibetan chant sung by children from North Carolina. For a moment he thinks he has entered the wrong apartment. He must never have noticed before how dark the wood of the wainscotting is down the hall, how blue the strip of wallpaper. This is only the first chapter, but he hears his girlfriend in the back room chanting a high, Appalachian harmony, not knowing yet that he is home, her feet tucked under her ass, junk mail scattered like white petals on the coffee table, and he knows this is the real story, not what happens next. This is what needs to be told.

By the time we reach this poem in Thomas's collection, we know he's a writer with a ravenous appetite for detail—"Please," he says at one point, "I just want to write it down"—and an exuberant appreciation for the "strange music" with which the world surprises us. His poems invite us into familiar places only to force us to experience the color and texture of their wallpaper anew. The real story is "not what happens next," but rather the immediate experience of the present moment. And as this poem suggests, one of the ways in which Thomas explores the lyric imagination most originally is by investigating its relation to the conventions of narrative.

Many of these poems are in fact firmly rooted in the narrative impulse. Some, such as "Orestes Remembers the Sea" and "Eurydice's Song," tell their stories in terms fundamentally congruent with how they appear in mythic sources:

...I did not know what Iphigenia knew,
but I knew *that* she knew, and that was enough.
She knew her father had bartered her blood
for one good west wind to get him off to war....

Others, like "Helen Back Home in Sparta" and "Dido's Closing Argument," take more liberties with character and focus more on emotional complexity, but they still link character and narrative in ways Robert Browning would recognize:

Was it worth it, King? To go to war for my rakish figure,
sleek as the prow of your cutter? It must have hurt:
to lose me to a boy with pomade in his hair and a taste
for stepping out and sleeping in. All I missed, Menelaus,
in ten years was the snout of your dog, but now I am home,
husband, my brazen locks unlocked for good. Take a good
gander. By the way, did we have children? I can't remember.

Still other poems construct their own self-contained narratives; "Cleaning the Fish," for instance, could be a story by Raymond Carver. Here's how it begins:

Watering the hedge, I knew what I was doing.
This was before the drought, before everyone
filled their patios with scrubby native plants.
The running waters would quench us forever.

I wrote poem after poem for Jean—sunsets
like gutted trout, that sort of thing (I'd never
cleaned a fish); fuchsias as spiraling flames
(lots of spirals)—I wondered if her husband
read them too. Strapping the cool, abrasive
seat belt over her bare shoulder as we'd go
to the bookstore, she'd get aroused.
I was in heaven, or at least Santa Rosa.
Every once in a while I knew it; mostly I did not....

This is nicely economical in establishing the speaker's tender, rueful self-assessment as he remembers the affair, though the narrative itself seems to weight the poem and to limit its range. (To be fair, the best moment in the poem is when it departs from narration and returns through metaphor to the "rose and / radical flesh" of the fish at the end.)

Thomas's true distinction emerges when he locates the poem—as he often does—just on the edge of narrative: when we sense that a story's in there somewhere but can't quite piece it together. This forces attention to the voice of the poem, and to the often tenuous, fractured consciousness that underlies it. Thomas is a shapechanger of considerable range and versatility (I'm struck, for instance, by how many of his speakers are women); the voices in these poems are variously urgent, giddy, wisecracking, caustic, and obsessed, but they are united in the degree to which they compel us to recognize the intensely mercurial nature of the self. A poem called "The Bluest Days," for example, seems grounded in a colloquial, domestic scenario, but it's constructed with such astonishing jump-cuts of association that its speaker becomes simultaneously lucid and highly mysterious:

> It's Tuesday evening. No, it's Sunday. See, already
> I'm caught in a lie. My mother could never understand—
> never, perhaps, forgive—how in fourth grade I fell
> so in love with Lisa Gander's handwriting
> that I traced her crimped scrawl until I had ruined
> my own script. When someone I barely knew died,
> Annie said he was the kindest man
> she'd ever known. I'd seen him nodding once
> in the corner of a room, part of a conversation
> I couldn't hear. I think of that now
> and know Annie was telling the simple truth.
> Sometimes I think I've locked the keys in my car
> more than any other human being on this earth. Sometimes
> birds of paradise drift through the bluest days
> on their boat-shaped bracts,
> their small blue and orange fore-and-afts
> tacking into the wind, and poetry is desire, a quality
> it happens to share with most other forms of conversation.

The narrative here is splintered, jittery, twisting just out of reach. We don't know why the speaker begins by getting the day wrong, or who Annie is, or what provokes the thought of car keys, or exactly how he gets from them to the vividly evoked birds of paradise and then to the sophisticated abstraction of "poetry is desire," all in one sentence. What keeps the poem from seeming like a mere tissue of non sequiturs, at least to my mind, is the sense that the associations make sense *to the speaker*, that there's a logic within the bounds of his own subjectivity. The beginning of the poem presents him as a chameleon, longing to try on Lisa Gander's handwriting, and perhaps prone to lying ("already / I'm caught in a lie"). This contrasts with Annie's telling "the simple truth" about the man who died, just as the prosaic failure of locking the keys in the car is countered by the exotic beauty of the drifting birds of paradise.

In the second half of the poem, the tension between prosaic (even bathetic) reality and the exuberance of desire is sustained:

> The boy's desire for new shoes with a jagged stripe,
> the girl's for chalk (white, satiny chalk!),
> lift off with enough force to air condition a thousand homes
> in Albuquerque, where I once won a dance contest,
> a pitcher of whatever beer they had on tap.
> It tasted as if it had slept overnight
> in a corner of the cloakroom, and at first
> I couldn't even find the girl I'd danced with
> to share the prize. She was kind, perhaps
> the kindest person I've ever known, as funny
> and beautiful as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,
> and when she took me home at five in the morning,
> her mother cooked us eggs and sausage
> from a pig she'd slaughtered herself. Kindness and lies
> and desire. Wanting to be someone else,
> someone nodding in a corner in a sugar-white
> T-shirt and jeans, talking about Shakespeare
> and where to get a decent cup of coffee
> and how crucial it is to be able to—
> someone nodding at the barn swallows
> quietly entering through a forgotten window propped open,

coming to rest on the wooden beams just beyond
the oblivious shoulders of strangers—
nodding at the white markings that must have evolved
into their elegant, lanceolate form
on blue forked tails a few million years ago.

The drift of the speaker's consciousness seems equally free-floating here, but *Thomas's* imaginative design locks brilliantly into place. The story of the dance contest, the stale beer, and the missing dance partner evokes a sad desperation; we can't yet fully fathom the speaker's associations (why *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?), but the fact that this rather ordinary-sounding event is so laden with significance for him suggests a good deal about his personality. "Kindness and lies / and desire," he says, as if murmuring a familiar refrain.

And then, in that last long periodic sentence—grammatically incomplete, as though to finish the thought would be to see things too clearly—he expresses the desire for transformation, for otherness: "wanting to be someone else," not just any someone, but "someone nodding in a corner," in fact *Annie's* someone, "the kindest man / she'd ever known." Earlier we were told the speaker couldn't hear the man's conversation; now we're told he was "talking about Shakespeare / and where to get a decent cup of coffee." Lies? Or truth? As though abruptly afraid of revealing too much, the speaker opens the window to the otherness of nature, and the poem closes with that mysterious image of the barn swallows entering the room: elegant, beautiful, but ultimately indecipherable. The image is much more persuasive than that of the rather forced and stylized birds of paradise; whereas the earlier image feels a little willful or manufactured (I notice that "boat-shaped bracts" is a phrase stolen from the dictionary), the barn swallows take their place in the room as if of their own volition. Left to its own devices, the poem seems to suggest, the imagination arrives at a moment of resolution—or, as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* would have it, "grows to something of great constancy; / But howsoever, strange and admirable." Again, in narrative terms this is fairly inchoate, but as a lyric portrait of an unstable self, and of the imagination in all its strengths and weaknesses, it's strikingly suggestive.

The collection explores other modes of transformative identity

as well. Poems such as "The Nocturnal Toy Peddler" and "The Poetry Merchant" draw on the tradition of magical realism: they demonstrate the sensuality, hallucinatory clarity, and vivid sense of surprise that we find in the fiction of Toni Morrison or Garcia Marquez, but removed from the exigencies of plot and concentrated in a lyric instant. "Repairing the Hubble Telescope" presents itself as the reminiscence of an ex-astronaut, but the almost plaintive, naïve tone suggests instead that the whole narrative is projected fantasy ("...the air lock opened and I was out there, / as if all my life I'd been listening to Mozart / on a homemade ham radio, music / measured in megaherz, and now I'd been hurled / into the orchestra pit"). And yet, and yet, his story is informed by just enough specific detail to make it barely credible that perhaps he really *is* an astronaut ("the galaxy Lagoon, full of what the astronomers / call wisps and twisters, star embryos / half a light-year long"). The tale keeps turning itself inside out, undermining our sense of certainty, until it ends in a wash of nostalgia and regret:

> Sitting in my den watching CNN,
> squeezing a whole lime in my Diet Coke,
> I am homesick
> for the only place I ever belonged,
> alone with the Hourglass Nebula
> and the stars they call blue stragglers,
> children wandering on a hillside
> among crisscrossing deer trails and mist, almost happy it's so late
> the search party must be giving up
> for the night, the men finishing off the last slug of warmish coffee
> from the thermos on the truck's dash,
> thinking they know their limits.

The "anarchic perspective" of outer space dissolves into the more familiar, if no less urgent, drama of children lost in the woods. It's a beautiful example of Thomas's ability to hold conflicting possibilities in suspension through the mediation of metaphor, whereby a thing can be itself ("the stars they call blue stragglers") and something quite different ("children wandering on a hillside") simultaneously.

These poems take bold risks, but the connections almost never feel forced; the sheer extravagance of the language, and the metamorphosing consciousness that underlies it, are carefully and precisely managed, never merely showing off.

The temptation to go on quoting Thomas is strong. I haven't fully represented the range of his voices here, from the erotic charge of "The Blizzard" to the bitter invective of "The Blue Willow Curse" to elegies for Dickinson and Neruda. What's most striking is that even the poems that look most like genre poems keep surprising us through their constantly modulating tone, so that a poem we think is satire will gradually darken and bloom as something else. Like the door-to-door salesman of the title poem, Thomas knows how to get his foot in the door ("I know this suitcase doesn't look like much, but stroke / this leather"), intrigue and seduce us ("There's another item I have to show you: this oval mirror. / Look at yourself: you won't see the same face twice"), and finally take us somewhere completely unexpected:

> Come outside for a minute and look at the steel-eyed sun.
> Look at the skid marks on the clouds. That's how we live.
> Look at all the shadows without any source: blue shadows
> of migrating birds darkening the butte under an empty sky,
> green and blue-green shadows of rain on untouched ground.
> You see what the fire sees, what the breath and the blue.
> You see what the glacier sees in the onslaught of spring.

Thomas is a poet of considerable grace and vision, and his book is a remarkable debut.

David Walker

CONTRIBUTORS

ANGELA BALL's latest book is **The Museum of the Revolution: 58 Exhibits**. A special New York School issue of *Mississippi Review* edited by her will appear in fall 2003.

BRUCE BEASLEY's fourth and latest book is **Signs and Abominations** (Wesleyan, 2000). He teaches at Western Washington University.

KEVIN BOWEN is the director of the William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequences at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. **Eight True Maps of the West: New and Selected Poems** will be published by Dedalus Press in Dublin in May 2003.

C. P. CAVAFY (1863-1933) was an Alexandrian Greek. Although he never published a book of poems in his lifetime (except privately, for friends) he is considered one of the most important modern poets. His translator, ALIKI BARNSTONE, is the author of **Wild With It** (Sheep Meadow, 2002) and editor of **A Book of Woman Poets from Antiquity to Now** and **The Shambhala Anthology of Women's Spiritual Poetry**. She teaches at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

NORMAN DUBIE will have two collections published next year by Copper Canyon: **The Collected Poems**, in paper, and a new volume of lyrics of which the poem in this issue, "Ordinary Mornings of a Coliseum," forms a significant part.

ALICE FRIMAN is the author of **Zoo** (Arkansas, 1999), which won the Ezra Pound Poetry Award from Truman State University and the Sheila Motton Prize from the New England Poetry Club.

JOHN GALLAHER's new book of poems is **Gentlemen in Turbans, Ladies in Cauls.** The title poem appeared in *FIELD* 64.

SANDRA M. GILBERT's latest books are **Kissing the Bread: New and Selected Poems**, and an anthology, **Inventions of Farewell: A Book of Elegies**. She has just completed a prose work entitled **Death's Door: Modern Dying and How We Grieve**.

ELTON GLASER edits the Akron Series in Poetry for the University of Akron Press. He has published five books of poetry, most recently **Pelican Tracks** (Southern Illinois, 2003).

FRANNIE LINDSAY's poems have appeared in many periodicals. A former NEA Literature Fellow with an MFA from Iowa, she is a classical pianist who

lives in Cambridge with her three retired greyhounds.

GERALD MAJER's poems have appeared in *FIELD* numerous times. A winner of three Maryland State Arts Council awards, he teaches literature and creative writing at Villa Julie College in Stevenson, Maryland.

RADHA MARCUM's recent poems have appeared in the *Bellingham Review* and in *Iris* (Emerging Voices Issue). She lives and teaches in Colorado.

CAMILLE NORTON was an NEA McDowell Fellow in the winter of 2002 and a fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts in the summer of 2002. She teaches at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California.

CAROLE SIMMONS OLES teaches at California State University, Chico, and is the author of six books of poems, mostly recently **Sympathetic Systems**.

KEVIN PRUFER's newest book is **The Finger Bone** (Carnegie Mellon, 2002). He edited **The New Young American Poets** (Southern Illinois, 2000).

PATTIANN ROGERS' **Song of the World Becoming** was a finalist for the LA Times Book Award.

ARTHUR SZE's latest book, **The Silk Dragon: Translations from the Chinese** (Copper Canyon, 2001), was selected for the 2002 Western States Book Award for Translation.

KARY WAYSON lives in Seattle. She is a waitress, a poetry teacher, and the recipient of the 2001 Artist Trust / Washington State Arts Commission Fellowship. *FIELD* has published her work before.

CHARLES WRIGHT lives in Charlottesville, Virginia. His current book is **A Short History of the Shadow**.

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